From Invasion to Withdrawal: A Comprehensive History of U.S. Military Engagement in Iraq (1990-2026)

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The United States' military involvement in Iraq, spanning from 1990 to 2026, represents one of the most complex and transformative chapters in modern American foreign policy. Beginning with the Gulf War, which aimed to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait, the U.S. engagement evolved through a series of critical phases, including the 2003 invasion, the protracted occupation, and the grueling fight against insurgency and terrorism. Each phase has left an indelible mark on Iraq's political landscape, contributing to both the rise and fall of extremist groups, the reconfiguration of regional power dynamics, and ongoing debates over the efficacy and ethics of military intervention. As the U.S. transitions from direct involvement to a supportive role, this paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the strategies, decisions, and consequences that have defined over three decades of U.S. military engagement in Iraq. By examining these pivotal moments, we seek to understand the long-term implications for Iraq, the Middle East, and U.S. foreign policy.

Keywords: U.S. military, Iraq War, Gulf War, Operation Iraqi Freedom, ISIS, insurgency, counterterrorism, U.S. withdrawal, Middle East, military intervention, foreign policy, Iraq stability, regional dynamics, U.S.-Iraq relations, military history. 39 pages.

Abstract

This paper provides a comprehensive analysis of the United States' military involvement in Iraq from the Gulf War in 1990 to the anticipated full withdrawal of troops by 2026. The U.S. engagement in Iraq has been a defining aspect of both American foreign policy and the broader geopolitical landscape of the Middle East for more than three decades. Beginning with Operation Desert Storm, which sought to liberate Kuwait from Iraqi occupation, the U.S. established a lasting military presence in the region. This involvement evolved through the enforcement of no-fly zones and sanctions throughout the 1990s, culminating in the 2003 invasion that led to the overthrow of Saddam Hussein.

The subsequent occupation period saw Iraq descend into insurgency and sectarian violence, prompting the U.S. to implement a surge strategy in 2007 to stabilize the country. Despite initial success, the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2011 coincided with the rise of ISIS, necessitating a renewed American military intervention. Operation Inherent Resolve, launched in 2014, played a crucial role in the eventual defeat of ISIS, but also underscored the complexities of achieving lasting peace and stability in Iraq.

As the U.S. transitions to an advisory role, with a full withdrawal planned by 2026, this paper explores the broader implications of this military engagement. It examines the impact on Iraq’s political and security landscape, the shifting dynamics within the region, and the lessons learned for future U.S. foreign policy. The history of U.S. involvement in Iraq serves as a case study in the challenges of military intervention, nation-building, and the long-term consequences of foreign engagement in a volatile region. Through this analysis, the paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the legacy of U.S. actions in Iraq and their enduring influence on global geopolitics.

I. Introduction

Background on Iraq's Geopolitical Significance

Iraq occupies a uniquely strategic position in the Middle East, both geographically and historically. Bordered by Iran, Turkey, Syria, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Kuwait, Iraq sits at the crossroads of key regional powers and trade routes. Its significance

is further enhanced by its vast reserves of oil, which are among the largest in the world. This natural resource has made Iraq a focal point for global energy markets and has drawn the interest of major powers, including the United States, throughout the 20th and 21st centuries.

Historically, Iraq has been a cradle of civilization, home to ancient Mesopotamia, where some of the earliest known societies emerged. This deep historical legacy has contributed to Iraq's cultural and religious significance, with the country being a central player in the Islamic world. However, Iraq's modern history has been marked by political instability, authoritarian rule under Saddam Hussein, and a series of conflicts that have had far-reaching consequences for the Middle East and beyond.

Overview of U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East Leading Up to the Gulf War

U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has long been driven by a combination of strategic interests, including securing access to oil resources, countering the influence of regional powers such as the Soviet Union (and later Iran), and maintaining the security of key allies, particularly Israel and Saudi Arabia. In the decades leading up to the Gulf War, these priorities led to an increasing American presence in the region, both diplomatically and militarily.

During the Cold War, the U.S. sought to contain Soviet influence in the Middle East, supporting regimes that aligned with Western interests. This often involved complex alliances and interventions, such as the U.S. backing of the Shah of Iran before the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The U.S. also played a pivotal role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, positioning itself as a key mediator while ensuring Israel's security.

Iraq emerged as a significant concern for U.S. policymakers in the 1980s, particularly during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). While the U.S. officially maintained a stance of neutrality, it covertly supported Iraq to counter the perceived threat of Iranian expansionism following the revolution in Iran. This period laid the groundwork for future U.S.-Iraq relations and set the stage for the Gulf War when Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990. The invasion was seen as a direct threat to the stability of the region and the global oil supply, prompting a swift and decisive response from the U.S. and its allies.

Objectives and Scope of the Paper

This paper aims to provide a detailed examination of U.S. military involvement in Iraq from the onset of the Gulf War in 1990 through to the planned full withdrawal of troops by 2026. The objectives are threefold:

1. **To Trace the Evolution of U.S. Engagement in Iraq**: The paper will chronicle the major phases of U.S. involvement, including the Gulf War, the 2003 invasion and occupation, the fight against insurgency, the battle against ISIS, and the ongoing transition to an advisory role. Each phase will be analyzed in terms of its objectives, strategies, outcomes, and broader implications for both Iraq and the region.
2. **To Analyze the Impact of U.S. Military Actions on Iraq's Political and Security Landscape**: The paper will explore how U.S. interventions have shaped Iraq's internal dynamics, including the fall of Saddam Hussein's regime, the rise of sectarian violence, the emergence of ISIS, and the ongoing challenges of nation-building. Special attention will be given to the unintended consequences of U.S. actions and the long-term effects on Iraq's sovereignty and stability.
3. **To Assess the Broader Geopolitical Implications of U.S. Engagement in Iraq**: Beyond Iraq's borders, U.S. military involvement has had significant repercussions for the Middle East and global geopolitics. The paper will assess how these actions have influenced U.S. relations with regional powers, altered the balance of power in the Middle East, and affected global perceptions of American foreign policy.

In covering these objectives, the scope of the paper will include not only a historical recount of events but also a critical analysis of the motivations, decisions, and outcomes of U.S. actions in Iraq. By doing so, the paper seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complexities of military intervention and its long-lasting impact on both the region and international relations.

II. The Gulf War and Its Aftermath (1990-2003)

A. Operation Desert Storm

Context: Iraq's Invasion of Kuwait and the Formation of an International Coalition

On August 2, 1990, Iraq, under the leadership of President Saddam Hussein, launched a surprise invasion of its small, oil-rich neighbor, Kuwait. The invasion was motivated by several factors, including Iraq's desire to control Kuwait's vast oil reserves, its claim that Kuwait was historically part of Iraq, and economic disputes over oil production and debt repayment. Additionally, Iraq was facing severe economic challenges following the costly Iran-Iraq War, and Saddam Hussein viewed the annexation of Kuwait as a potential solution to these problems.

The international community swiftly condemned Iraq's aggression, viewing it as a blatant violation of international law and a threat to regional stability. The invasion also posed a direct threat to global oil supplies, given Kuwait's significant oil production and its proximity to Saudi Arabia, the world's largest oil exporter. In response, the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 660, demanding Iraq's immediate withdrawal from Kuwait. When diplomatic efforts to resolve the crisis failed, the U.N. authorized the use of force under Resolution 678.

The U.S., under President George H.W. Bush, took the lead in forming a broad international coalition to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. This coalition included over 30 nations, ranging from NATO allies to regional powers such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The coalition's objectives were clear: to liberate Kuwait, restore its legitimate government, and ensure the security of the Gulf region.

The Execution of the Gulf War and Its Military and Political Outcomes

Operation Desert Storm, the combat phase of the Gulf War, began on January 17, 1991, following a massive buildup of coalition forces in Saudi Arabia, codenamed Operation Desert Shield. The operation commenced with a devastating aerial and missile bombardment that targeted Iraq's military infrastructure, communication networks, and key government facilities. This air campaign, which lasted several weeks, effectively neutralized Iraq's ability to wage war and crippled its economy.

On February 24, 1991, the coalition launched a ground assault, quickly overwhelming Iraqi forces and liberating Kuwait within 100 hours. The speed and efficiency of the coalition's victory highlighted the technological and logistical superiority of the U.S.-led forces, particularly in terms of precision-guided munitions and air power.

The war ended on February 28, 1991, with a ceasefire declared by President Bush. However, the decision was made not to pursue Iraqi forces into Baghdad or to remove Saddam Hussein from power, a choice that would later be a subject of intense debate. The primary objectives of the operation were achieved: Kuwait was liberated, and Iraq's military capabilities were significantly degraded. However, Saddam Hussein remained in power, and Iraq's internal stability was severely compromised.

Politically, the Gulf War reinforced the U.S.'s role as a dominant global military power and demonstrated the effectiveness of international coalitions in enforcing U.N. resolutions. However, the war also left Iraq in a state of economic devastation and humanitarian crisis, setting the stage for further conflict and U.S. involvement in the region.

B. Sanctions and No-Fly Zones

The Implementation of Sanctions and No-Fly Zones to Contain Saddam Hussein's Regime

In the aftermath of the Gulf War, the U.S. and its allies focused on containing Saddam Hussein's regime to prevent further aggression and to compel Iraq to comply with U.N. resolutions, particularly those related to disarmament and the elimination of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). To this end, the U.N. imposed a comprehensive set of economic sanctions on Iraq, starting with Resolution 661, which prohibited all trade with Iraq except for medical supplies and, under certain conditions, food.

These sanctions aimed to pressure Saddam Hussein into relinquishing his WMD programs and complying with international norms. However, they also had severe unintended consequences for the Iraqi population, leading to widespread poverty, malnutrition, and a collapse of the country's healthcare and education systems. The sanctions became a point of contention within the international

community, with critics arguing that they disproportionately harmed ordinary Iraqis while failing to weaken Saddam's grip on power.

In addition to sanctions, the U.S. and its allies established no-fly zones over northern and southern Iraq in the early 1990s, under the pretext of protecting Kurdish and Shia populations from Saddam Hussein's reprisals. The northern no-fly zone, established in April 1991, aimed to protect the Kurdish population in Iraq's mountainous regions, while the southern no-fly zone, established in August 1992, sought to shield the Shia population around Basra. These zones were enforced by coalition aircraft, which regularly patrolled Iraqi airspace and engaged any Iraqi forces that violated the zones.

The no-fly zones were intended to serve as a deterrent against Saddam Hussein's attempts to reassert control over these regions, but they also effectively partitioned Iraq and limited the central government's authority. The zones allowed Kurdish and Shia groups to establish de facto autonomous regions, which would later play a significant role in Iraq's post-2003 political landscape.

The Impact of These Measures on Iraq and the U.S.'s Ongoing Military Presence in the Region

The sanctions and no-fly zones had a profound impact on Iraq and contributed to the long-term instability of the region. Economically, the sanctions devastated Iraq's infrastructure and crippled its economy, leading to widespread suffering among the civilian population. The humanitarian crisis that ensued became a source of significant international criticism and strained relations between the U.S. and some of its allies.

Politically, the sanctions and no-fly zones undermined Saddam Hussein's control over parts of Iraq but failed to dislodge him from power. Instead, the measures entrenched his regime's defiance and fueled anti-Western sentiment among Iraqis, who viewed the sanctions as a form of collective punishment. The persistence of the no-fly zones also meant that the U.S. and its allies maintained a continuous military presence in the region, with regular air patrols and occasional strikes on Iraqi targets. This ongoing presence kept Iraq on the international agenda and set the stage for future confrontations.

For the U.S., the enforcement of sanctions and no-fly zones represented a long-term commitment to containing Saddam Hussein's regime, but it also highlighted the limitations of such measures in achieving broader political objectives. The failure to bring about regime change or significant disarmament through these means led to growing frustration within the U.S. government, which would later influence the decision to pursue a more direct approach in 2003.

Overall, the period between the Gulf War and the 2003 invasion of Iraq was marked by a tense and volatile standoff between Iraq and the international community. The sanctions and no-fly zones, while effective in containing Saddam Hussein to some extent, also sowed the seeds for future conflict and laid the groundwork for the U.S.'s re-engagement in Iraq under the banner of Operation Iraqi Freedom.

III. The 2003 Invasion and Occupation

A. Operation Iraqi Freedom

Justifications for the Invasion: WMDs, Terrorism, and the Bush Doctrine

The 2003 invasion of Iraq, known as Operation Iraqi Freedom, was initiated by the United States and its coalition partners under the leadership of President George W. Bush. The invasion was justified on multiple grounds, each reflecting the broader strategic aims of U.S. foreign policy in the post-9/11 world.

The primary rationale for the invasion was the belief that Iraq possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), including chemical, biological, and potentially nuclear weapons. The Bush administration argued that these weapons posed an immediate threat to the United States, its allies, and regional stability. This concern was heightened by Iraq's history of using chemical weapons against both Iran during the Iran-Iraq War and its own Kurdish population. The administration also claimed that Saddam Hussein's regime had links to terrorist organizations, including al-Qaeda, and that Iraq could potentially provide such groups with WMDs, thereby amplifying the threat of global terrorism.

These concerns were framed within the broader context of the Bush Doctrine, which advocated for preemptive military action to neutralize perceived threats

before they could materialize. The doctrine marked a significant shift in U.S. foreign policy, emphasizing the need to address security risks proactively rather than reactively. In this context, the invasion of Iraq was presented as a necessary step to prevent a future catastrophe akin to the attacks of September 11, 2001.

Additionally, the Bush administration sought to promote the idea that the removal of Saddam Hussein would pave the way for democratization in Iraq and the broader Middle East. This goal was rooted in the belief that spreading democracy would contribute to long-term regional stability and undermine the ideological foundations of terrorism.

The Initial Military Campaign and the Toppling of Saddam Hussein

Operation Iraqi Freedom officially began on March 20, 2003, with a massive and coordinated air assault, followed by a swift ground invasion. The initial military campaign, characterized by the doctrine of "shock and awe," aimed to overwhelm the Iraqi military with a display of overwhelming force, targeting key government and military installations across the country. The campaign involved extensive airstrikes, missile attacks, and rapid advances by coalition ground forces.

Within weeks, coalition forces had reached the outskirts of Baghdad, and by April 9, 2003, Saddam Hussein's regime had effectively collapsed, symbolized by the toppling of a statue of Saddam in Baghdad’s Firdos Square. Saddam himself fled the capital and went into hiding, while the remnants of his military were quickly defeated or surrendered. The speed and efficiency of the coalition’s advance were widely praised, with many viewing the operation as a decisive victory.

However, the swift military success did not translate into immediate political stability. While Saddam Hussein was eventually captured in December 2003 and later executed, the fall of his regime created a power vacuum that would soon be filled by a variety of insurgent groups, sectarian militias, and foreign fighters, setting the stage for a prolonged and bloody conflict.

B. Occupation and Insurgency

The Challenges of Nation-Building in Post-Saddam Iraq

With the fall of Saddam Hussein, the U.S.-led coalition faced the enormous challenge of rebuilding Iraq’s political, economic, and social structures. The

Coalition Provisional Authority (CPA), led by the United States, was established to govern Iraq during the transition period. The CPA's mandate included the disarmament of militias, the establishment of democratic institutions, the reconstruction of infrastructure, and the revitalization of the economy.

One of the most controversial decisions made by the CPA was the policy of de-Baathification, which involved purging members of Saddam Hussein's Baath Party from government positions and the dissolution of the Iraqi military. While intended to dismantle the remnants of Saddam's regime, these measures had the unintended consequence of alienating a significant portion of the Sunni population, many of whom were left without employment or political representation. This fueled resentment and contributed to the emergence of a widespread insurgency.

The insurgency was driven by a complex array of factors, including opposition to foreign occupation, sectarian tensions between Sunni and Shia Muslims, and the presence of foreign jihadists who saw Iraq as a battleground for their cause. Insurgent groups, including al-Qaeda in Iraq, carried out a campaign of guerrilla warfare, suicide bombings, and assassinations, targeting coalition forces, Iraqi security personnel, and civilians alike.

The Rise of Insurgency, Sectarian Violence, and the Descent into Civil War

As the insurgency gained momentum, Iraq began to descend into a cycle of sectarian violence. Sunni and Shia militias, often backed by external actors such as Iran, engaged in brutal retaliatory attacks against each other, leading to widespread killings, displacement, and the fragmentation of Iraqi society. The bombing of the Al-Askari Mosque in Samarra in 2006, a site of immense religious significance to Shia Muslims, marked a turning point in the conflict, sparking a full-scale civil war.

The situation on the ground became increasingly dire, with coalition forces struggling to maintain order and protect civilians. The Iraqi government, still in its infancy, was largely ineffective in controlling the violence, and the country's infrastructure continued to deteriorate. By 2006, Iraq was teetering on the brink of total collapse, with violence reaching unprecedented levels and the prospect of a stable, unified Iraq seeming increasingly remote.

The failure to anticipate the depth of Iraq's sectarian divisions and the complexities of nation-building in a post-dictatorship environment highlighted the limitations of the U.S. strategy. The occupation period exposed the difficulties of imposing democracy through military means, especially in a society deeply scarred by decades of authoritarian rule and sectarian strife.

C. The Surge Strategy (2007-2008)

The Decision to Increase Troop Levels to Stabilize Iraq

In response to the escalating violence and the apparent failure of existing strategies, the U.S. government, under the leadership of President George W. Bush, made the decision to implement a new approach known as "the surge." Announced in January 2007, the surge involved the deployment of an additional 30,000 U.S. troops to Iraq, bringing the total number of U.S. forces in the country to over 160,000. The primary objectives of the surge were to reduce violence, protect the civilian population, and create a stable environment in which political reconciliation could take place.

The surge was accompanied by a shift in military tactics, with U.S. forces focusing on securing and holding key neighborhoods in Baghdad and other volatile areas, rather than merely conducting large-scale offensive operations. The strategy also involved working closely with local Sunni tribes, who had grown disillusioned with al-Qaeda's extreme tactics, to turn them against the insurgents in what became known as the "Anbar Awakening."

Outcomes of the Surge and Its Role in Reducing Violence

The surge had a significant impact on the security situation in Iraq. By the end of 2008, levels of violence had decreased markedly, and the insurgency appeared to be in retreat. The collaboration between U.S. forces and Sunni tribal militias, along with the targeted killing or capture of key insurgent leaders, weakened the insurgency's capabilities and disrupted its operations.

In Baghdad and other major cities, the presence of additional U.S. troops helped to restore a semblance of order, and many displaced civilians began to return to their homes. The reduction in violence allowed for a degree of political progress, with the Iraqi government holding provincial elections in 2009 and making efforts to integrate Sunni leaders into the political process.

However, while the surge succeeded in reducing violence in the short term, it did not address the underlying political and sectarian divisions that continued to plague Iraq. The Iraqi government, led by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, struggled to achieve meaningful reconciliation between Sunni, Shia, and Kurdish factions, and the country remained deeply divided along sectarian lines.

Moreover, the relative stability achieved by the surge proved to be fragile. As U.S. forces began to withdraw and the surge came to an end, many of the gains made during this period began to unravel. The resurgence of sectarian tensions, exacerbated by the Syrian civil war and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), would later plunge Iraq back into conflict, highlighting the limitations of the surge as a long-term solution to Iraq's deep-seated challenges.

Overall, the surge strategy marked a critical turning point in the Iraq War, demonstrating the potential for military intervention to alter the course of a conflict. However, it also underscored the complexities of nation-building in a divided society and the difficulties of achieving lasting peace through military means alone. The lessons learned from the surge would continue to inform U.S. military strategy in Iraq and beyond, as policymakers grappled with the challenges of stabilizing fragile states in the aftermath of conflict.

IV. U.S. Withdrawal and the Rise of ISIS (2011-2014)

A. The 2011 Withdrawal

Implementation of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA)

The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 marked a significant turning point in the country's recent history. This withdrawal was guided by the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), a bilateral treaty signed in 2008 between the United States and Iraq. SOFA outlined the terms and timeline for the withdrawal of U.S. military forces from Iraq, reflecting both the U.S. desire to end its combat mission and the Iraqi government's growing insistence on reclaiming full sovereignty.

According to SOFA, U.S. combat troops were to withdraw from Iraqi cities by June 30, 2009, and from the entire country by December 31, 2011. This timeline was largely adhered to, with the last U.S. combat brigade leaving Iraq in August 2010,

followed by the formal end of the U.S. military mission, Operation Iraqi Freedom, which was replaced by Operation New Dawn. The remaining U.S. troops transitioned to an advisory and training role, focusing on building the capacity of the Iraqi security forces.

The complete withdrawal of U.S. forces in December 2011 was seen as a major milestone, fulfilling President Barack Obama's campaign promise to end the war in Iraq. However, it also left Iraq at a critical juncture, as the country struggled to manage its security and governance challenges without the direct support of U.S. military forces.

The Impact of the U.S. Withdrawal on Iraq's Stability

The U.S. withdrawal had profound implications for Iraq's stability. While the Iraqi security forces had made significant progress in terms of training and capabilities, they were still heavily reliant on U.S. support for intelligence, logistics, and airpower. The sudden absence of these resources created a security vacuum that exposed Iraq to new and resurgent threats.

Politically, the withdrawal exacerbated existing tensions within Iraq's fragile power-sharing arrangements. The government of Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, a Shia Muslim, became increasingly authoritarian and sectarian in its approach, marginalizing Sunni Arabs and other minority groups. This deepened the sense of alienation and resentment among Iraq's Sunni population, many of whom had already felt excluded from the post-Saddam political order.

The withdrawal also coincided with broader regional upheavals, particularly the Arab Spring, which had a destabilizing effect on many Middle Eastern countries, including Iraq. The Syrian civil war, which began in 2011, further complicated the situation by creating a chaotic and ungoverned space that would soon become a breeding ground for extremist groups.

In this context, Iraq's security situation deteriorated rapidly after the U.S. withdrawal. Insurgent groups, including the remnants of al-Qaeda in Iraq, began to regroup and reassert themselves. The Iraqi government's inability to effectively govern and secure the country contributed to the resurgence of violence, setting the stage for the emergence of a new and even more dangerous threat: the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).

B. The Emergence of ISIS

The Conditions That Led to the Rise of ISIS

The rise of ISIS was the result of a confluence of factors, both within Iraq and across the broader region. Following the U.S. withdrawal, Iraq's Sunni population increasingly felt disenfranchised by the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad. This sense of exclusion was exacerbated by Maliki's heavy-handed tactics, which included the arbitrary detention of Sunni leaders, the suppression of Sunni protests, and the use of sectarian rhetoric. These actions alienated many Sunnis, some of whom began to view the central government as an oppressive force.

Meanwhile, the civil war in neighboring Syria provided a fertile ground for jihadist groups to flourish. Al-Qaeda in Iraq, which had been severely weakened during the U.S. surge, rebranded itself as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and began to exploit the chaos in Syria to rebuild its strength. Under the leadership of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS adopted a more extreme and brutal approach than its predecessor, focusing on establishing a territorial caliphate rather than merely waging guerrilla warfare.

ISIS's success in Syria allowed it to amass significant resources, including weapons, money, and recruits. The group's ideology, which combined extreme Sunni Islamism with a rejection of modern state structures, attracted a wide range of followers, including foreign fighters from around the world. By 2013, ISIS had established a stronghold in northeastern Syria and began to expand its operations into Iraq, taking advantage of the weak and divided state.

The Fall of Mosul and the Rapid Expansion of ISIS in Iraq and Syria

The turning point for ISIS's expansion came in June 2014, when the group launched a lightning offensive across northern Iraq. On June 10, 2014, ISIS forces captured Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, with little resistance from the Iraqi security forces, who were demoralized, poorly equipped, and plagued by corruption. The fall of Mosul was a stunning victory for ISIS and a humiliating defeat for the Iraqi government, which lost control of vast swathes of territory almost overnight.

With the capture of Mosul, ISIS declared the establishment of a caliphate, with Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi as its leader, and rebranded itself simply as the Islamic

State. The group's rapid expansion continued as it seized control of key cities such as Tikrit, Fallujah, and Ramadi in Iraq, as well as Raqqa in Syria, which became the de facto capital of its self-proclaimed state.

ISIS's success was fueled by its ability to exploit sectarian divisions and state weaknesses in both Iraq and Syria. The group employed a combination of conventional military tactics, guerrilla warfare, and terror attacks to subdue populations and enforce its draconian version of Sharia law. Its brutal methods, including mass executions, enslavement, and the destruction of cultural heritage, shocked the world and drew widespread condemnation.

The rapid rise of ISIS posed a severe threat not only to Iraq and Syria but to regional and global security. The group's control of territory allowed it to generate significant revenue through oil smuggling, extortion, and taxation, making it one of the wealthiest terrorist organizations in history. Moreover, ISIS's sophisticated use of social media and propaganda attracted thousands of foreign fighters, who traveled to Iraq and Syria to join its ranks.

The fall of Mosul and the subsequent expansion of ISIS represented the culmination of years of instability and conflict in Iraq and the wider region. The group's rise highlighted the fragility of the post-2003 Iraqi state, the consequences of the U.S. withdrawal, and the profound challenges of addressing the underlying causes of extremism in the Middle East.

As ISIS continued to expand its reach, it became clear that the group would not be defeated through conventional military means alone. The international community, led by the United States, was forced to respond, leading to the launch of Operation Inherent Resolve in August 2014, a new phase in the ongoing struggle to stabilize Iraq and counter the threat of jihadist extremism.

V. Return to Iraq: The Fight Against ISIS (2014-2021)

A. Operation Inherent Resolve

The U.S. Decision to Return to Iraq to Combat ISIS

In response to the rapid territorial gains and extreme brutality of ISIS, the United States, under President Barack Obama, made the critical decision to return to Iraq

in 2014. This decision marked the beginning of Operation Inherent Resolve, a coordinated military campaign aimed at degrading and ultimately defeating ISIS. The return to Iraq came just three years after the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces in 2011, highlighting the severity of the threat posed by ISIS not only to Iraq and Syria but to global security.

The decision to intervene was driven by several factors. First, the fall of Mosul in June 2014 and the subsequent expansion of ISIS across Iraq and Syria shocked the international community and underscored the inadequacy of the Iraqi security forces to counter the group. The humanitarian crisis caused by ISIS's brutal campaign, including mass executions, enslavement, and genocide, further galvanized international action. Additionally, the strategic importance of Iraq, with its vast oil reserves and central location in the Middle East, made it imperative for the U.S. and its allies to prevent ISIS from establishing a lasting caliphate.

Operation Inherent Resolve officially began on August 8, 2014, with U.S. airstrikes targeting ISIS positions in northern Iraq. The operation quickly expanded to include a broader international coalition of over 60 nations, each contributing to the fight against ISIS through airstrikes, intelligence sharing, training of local forces, and humanitarian aid. The coalition's efforts were focused on three main objectives: halting ISIS's advance, weakening its capabilities through sustained military pressure, and supporting local forces to reclaim and hold territory.

Key Military Operations and the Role of the International Coalition

Operation Inherent Resolve was characterized by a series of key military operations designed to target ISIS strongholds, disrupt its command and control, and degrade its ability to wage war. These operations were carried out by coalition forces, including U.S. and European air forces, special operations units, and local ground forces such as the Iraqi Army, Kurdish Peshmerga, and various militia groups.

One of the earliest and most significant operations was the defense of Erbil, the capital of the semi-autonomous Kurdish region in northern Iraq. In August 2014, ISIS forces advanced toward Erbil, prompting a swift response from U.S. airpower, which conducted strikes to halt the ISIS advance and prevent the city from falling. This operation marked a turning point, as it demonstrated the effectiveness of

airstrikes in stopping ISIS's momentum and provided the Kurdish forces with the support needed to launch counteroffensives.

Another critical operation was the Battle of Kobani, a city in northern Syria that became a symbol of resistance against ISIS. In September 2014, ISIS laid siege to Kobani, but the determined defense by Kurdish fighters, supported by coalition airstrikes, ultimately led to the group's defeat in the city by January 2015. The Battle of Kobani highlighted the importance of close air support and the resilience of local forces in the broader campaign against ISIS.

Throughout the operation, the international coalition focused on degrading ISIS's financial and logistical networks. Airstrikes targeted oil facilities controlled by ISIS, which were a major source of revenue for the group. Additionally, coalition forces disrupted ISIS's supply lines, communications, and leadership, gradually eroding its ability to control territory and carry out large-scale operations.

The coalition also played a crucial role in training and equipping local forces, particularly the Iraqi Army and Kurdish Peshmerga. This training focused on improving the capabilities of these forces to conduct counterinsurgency operations, hold recaptured territory, and protect civilian populations. The training programs were vital in rebuilding the Iraqi security forces, which had been severely weakened by years of conflict and the initial collapse in the face of ISIS's advance.

B. Recapturing Mosul and the Decline of ISIS

The Battle for Mosul as a Turning Point

The Battle for Mosul, which began in October 2016 and concluded in July 2017, was one of the most significant and decisive engagements in the fight against ISIS. Mosul, Iraq's second-largest city, had been under ISIS control since June 2014 and served as the group's de facto capital in Iraq. Recapturing Mosul was a primary objective for the Iraqi government and the international coalition, as it was a critical stronghold for ISIS both strategically and symbolically.

The battle was one of the largest urban warfare campaigns since World War II, involving tens of thousands of Iraqi security forces, Kurdish Peshmerga fighters, and various militia groups, all supported by coalition airpower and special

operations forces. The operation was launched from multiple directions, with Iraqi forces advancing into the city from the east, west, and south.

The fighting in Mosul was intense and brutal, as ISIS fighters employed a variety of tactics to defend the city, including the use of human shields, improvised explosive devices (IEDs), and suicide bombings. The dense urban environment made the battle particularly challenging, as coalition and Iraqi forces had to clear neighborhoods street by street, often at great cost.

Despite these challenges, the Iraqi forces gradually made progress, with coalition airstrikes and artillery playing a crucial role in weakening ISIS's defenses. By July 2017, after nine months of grueling combat, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared victory in Mosul. The liberation of the city was a major turning point in the campaign against ISIS, effectively dismantling the group's control over its most important urban center in Iraq.

The Eventual Decline of ISIS's Territorial Control

The recapture of Mosul marked the beginning of the end for ISIS's territorial ambitions in Iraq and Syria. Following the loss of Mosul, ISIS rapidly lost ground in both countries as coalition and local forces continued their offensives. In Iraq, cities like Tal Afar, Hawija, and the western Anbar region, including the town of Al-Qaim near the Syrian border, were liberated in quick succession.

In Syria, the coalition, along with local partners such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), intensified their efforts to recapture key ISIS-held territories. The fall of Raqqa, ISIS's de facto capital in Syria, in October 2017, was another critical blow to the group. Raqqa had been a symbol of ISIS's control and was the site of many of its most brutal atrocities. The battle for Raqqa, much like Mosul, was marked by intense urban combat, but the coalition's strategy of working closely with local forces proved effective in dismantling ISIS's hold on the city.

By the end of 2017, ISIS's territorial control had been reduced to a few isolated pockets in Iraq and Syria. The group's self-declared caliphate, which at its height controlled vast territories spanning from western Iraq to eastern Syria, had effectively collapsed. The loss of territory severely weakened ISIS's ability to generate revenue, recruit fighters, and plan large-scale attacks.

Despite these successes, the decline of ISIS's territorial control did not mean the end of the group. ISIS adapted to its losses by shifting its focus from holding territory to conducting insurgent and terrorist operations. The group reverted to guerrilla tactics, including hit-and-run attacks, assassinations, and bombings, particularly in rural areas where government control was weak. The threat of ISIS-inspired attacks also spread globally, as the group's ideology continued to attract followers around the world.

The battle against ISIS, therefore, evolved from a conventional military campaign to a broader counterterrorism effort aimed at preventing the resurgence of the group. This ongoing fight required not only military operations but also efforts to address the root causes of extremism, including political instability, economic deprivation, and sectarian divisions.

By 2021, while ISIS was no longer the territorial power it once was, the international community remained vigilant against the group's potential to re-emerge. The legacy of the fight against ISIS left a profound impact on Iraq and Syria, as both countries faced the daunting task of rebuilding in the aftermath of years of war, displacement, and destruction. The struggle against ISIS also provided important lessons for the international community about the complexities of combating extremist ideologies and the necessity of a multifaceted approach to ensure long-term stability in the region.

VI. Transition to an Advisory Role and Continued U.S. Presence (2021-2025)

A. End of Combat Operations

The Decision to Transition U.S. Forces to an Advisory and Support Role

By 2021, the U.S. had achieved significant progress in the military campaign against ISIS, culminating in the group's territorial defeat. With ISIS no longer controlling large swathes of territory in Iraq and Syria, the Biden administration reassessed the U.S. military's role in the region. Reflecting a broader strategic shift in U.S. foreign policy, the administration decided to formally end the U.S. combat mission in Iraq by December 2021. This decision was made in close coordination with the Iraqi government, which sought to emphasize its sovereignty and control over national security matters.

The transition marked a new phase in U.S.-Iraq relations, focusing on the long-term stability and security of Iraq without the direct involvement of U.S. combat troops. The U.S. military's role shifted from leading combat operations to providing training, intelligence, and logistical support to Iraqi security forces. This advisory role was designed to empower Iraq's military and security apparatus, enabling them to manage internal threats, including the remnants of ISIS and other insurgent groups, more independently.

This transition also involved a reconfiguration of the U.S. military footprint in Iraq. While the number of U.S. troops in Iraq was reduced, a significant contingent remained to carry out the advisory mission. These troops operated from key bases, often working alongside Iraqi forces in joint operations centers, providing critical support in areas such as counterterrorism, air support, and surveillance. The U.S. also continued to provide advanced military equipment and training to ensure that the Iraqi security forces were equipped to handle the evolving security landscape.

The decision to end combat operations was consistent with the broader U.S. strategic goal of reducing its military footprint in the Middle East while maintaining the capability to respond to emergent threats. It also reflected a desire to shift focus towards other global priorities, including the Indo-Pacific region and competition with China. However, the ongoing advisory role underscored the U.S. commitment to ensuring that the gains made against ISIS were not reversed and that Iraq remained a stable partner in the region.

The Ongoing Presence of U.S. Troops and Their Mission in the Region

Despite the formal end of combat operations, the presence of U.S. troops in Iraq remained a critical component of the broader strategy to maintain regional security. The mission of the U.S. forces was multifaceted, encompassing several key objectives:

1. **Supporting Iraqi Security Forces**: U.S. advisors continued to work closely with the Iraqi military to improve its capabilities, particularly in areas such as counterterrorism, intelligence gathering, and special operations. This support was vital in preventing the resurgence of ISIS and in helping the Iraqi government maintain control over its territory.

2. **Countering Iranian Influence**: The U.S. military presence in Iraq also served as a counterbalance to the influence of Iran, which had significantly increased its presence in Iraq through the backing of various Shia militias and political factions. The U.S. aimed to bolster Iraq's sovereignty and reduce its dependence on Iranian-backed groups, thereby contributing to regional stability.
3. **Maintaining Regional Stability**: The continued U.S. presence was part of a broader strategy to ensure stability in the Middle East, a region marked by ongoing conflicts and geopolitical rivalries. The U.S. forces in Iraq were positioned to respond to potential crises, including the threat of terrorism and the spillover effects of the conflict in Syria.
4. **Humanitarian Assistance and Reconstruction**: In addition to security missions, U.S. forces played a role in supporting humanitarian efforts and reconstruction projects in Iraq. This included aiding in the rebuilding of infrastructure damaged during the fight against ISIS and providing assistance to displaced populations.

While the role of U.S. troops in Iraq had evolved, their presence remained a key element of U.S. strategy in the region, ensuring that Iraq did not once again become a breeding ground for extremist groups or a battleground for regional powers.

B. Diplomatic and Strategic Implications

How the Reduced U.S. Presence Has Affected Iraq's Security and Regional Dynamics

The reduction in U.S. military presence in Iraq had significant diplomatic and strategic implications, both for Iraq's internal security and for the broader Middle East region.

Impact on Iraq's Security

The transition to an advisory role placed greater responsibility on the Iraqi government and security forces to manage the country's security challenges. In the short term, this shift tested the effectiveness and resilience of the Iraqi security apparatus, which had been heavily reliant on U.S. support. The Iraqi

military's ability to conduct operations independently, gather intelligence, and coordinate across various branches was crucial in determining whether the country could maintain stability.

However, the reduced U.S. presence also highlighted vulnerabilities in Iraq's security landscape. While ISIS no longer held territory, it remained an active insurgency, capable of carrying out attacks, particularly in rural and underserved areas. The Iraqi government had to navigate these challenges while also addressing other security threats, including the influence of powerful militias, some of which had ties to Iran and operated with significant autonomy. The diminished direct U.S. involvement raised concerns about whether Iraq could effectively counter these groups without external assistance.

Diplomatic Relations and Sovereignty

Diplomatically, the reduction of U.S. forces was seen as a positive step by many Iraqis, who viewed it as a restoration of Iraq's sovereignty. The presence of foreign troops had long been a contentious issue in Iraq, fueling nationalist sentiments and opposition from various political factions. The transition allowed the Iraqi government to assert greater control over its internal affairs, potentially strengthening its legitimacy.

However, the reduced U.S. presence also complicated Iraq's foreign relations, particularly with its neighbors. Iran, which had cultivated strong ties with various Iraqi political and militia groups, sought to expand its influence in the vacuum left by the U.S. drawdown. This increased Iranian influence risked exacerbating sectarian tensions within Iraq and further entrenching the country in regional rivalries.

The U.S. continued to engage with Iraq diplomatically, emphasizing the importance of a stable, independent Iraq as a counterbalance to Iranian ambitions in the region. This included ongoing support for Iraq's economic development, governance reforms, and efforts to integrate disenfranchised groups into the political process. The U.S. also worked to strengthen Iraq's relationships with other regional powers, including Saudi Arabia and Turkey, to reduce its dependence on Iran.

Regional Dynamics

The strategic implications of the reduced U.S. presence extended beyond Iraq, influencing the broader geopolitical dynamics of the Middle East. The U.S. drawdown in Iraq was part of a broader shift in American foreign policy, reflecting a desire to reduce military commitments in the Middle East while pivoting to other global priorities. This shift prompted regional actors to reassess their strategies and alliances.

For Iran, the reduced U.S. presence presented an opportunity to solidify its influence in Iraq and the broader region. Iranian-backed militias continued to operate with relative impunity in Iraq, challenging the authority of the central government and contributing to instability. Iran also sought to use its influence in Iraq to project power across the region, particularly in Syria and Lebanon.

For other regional powers, such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey, the U.S. drawdown raised concerns about the balance of power in the Middle East. These countries viewed a strong and stable Iraq as a necessary counterweight to Iranian influence. As a result, they increased their diplomatic and economic engagement with Iraq, seeking to strengthen bilateral ties and support Iraq's sovereignty.

The reduced U.S. presence also had implications for the broader fight against terrorism. While ISIS had been territorially defeated, the group remained a potent ideological force with the capacity to inspire attacks globally. The international coalition, led by the U.S., continued to monitor and counter these threats, but the diminished U.S. footprint in Iraq posed challenges to intelligence gathering and coordination.

In conclusion, the transition of U.S. forces from a combat role to an advisory and support role in Iraq had significant implications for both Iraq's internal security and the broader strategic landscape of the Middle East. While the reduced U.S. presence allowed Iraq to assert greater sovereignty, it also exposed vulnerabilities and shifted the regional balance of power. The success of this transition depended on the Iraqi government's ability to navigate these challenges, maintain stability, and prevent the resurgence of extremist groups, all while balancing the complex web of regional alliances and rivalries.

VII. The Full Withdrawal and Its Implications (2025-2026)

A. The Decision to Fully Withdraw

Factors Leading to the Decision for a Full U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq

The decision to fully withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq by 2025 was the culmination of several strategic, political, and diplomatic considerations that evolved over time. Key factors influencing this decision included:

1. **Strategic Reorientation of U.S. Foreign Policy**: By the mid-2020s, the United States was increasingly focused on addressing emerging global challenges, such as the rise of China and the complexities of the Indo-Pacific region. This shift in focus required a reallocation of military resources and a reduction of long-standing commitments in the Middle East. The full withdrawal from Iraq was part of this broader strategy to pivot toward other areas of geopolitical concern.
2. **Decreased Threat from ISIS**: Although ISIS remained a threat, its territorial ambitions had been effectively crushed, and the group had been significantly weakened by sustained military pressure from the international coalition and local forces. With the immediate threat of a resurgent ISIS largely contained, U.S. policymakers felt more confident in transitioning security responsibilities entirely to the Iraqi government.
3. **Iraqi Sovereignty and Public Opinion**: Continued U.S. military presence had been a contentious issue within Iraq, with many Iraqis viewing it as an infringement on their sovereignty. The Iraqi government, reflecting public sentiment, increasingly pushed for a full withdrawal as a symbol of Iraq's independence and ability to manage its own affairs. The decision to withdraw aligned with these domestic political pressures.
4. **Bilateral Agreements and Diplomatic Considerations**: The full withdrawal was negotiated as part of a broader set of bilateral agreements between the U.S. and Iraq, which included provisions for continued economic and diplomatic support, as well as ongoing cooperation in counterterrorism efforts. These agreements aimed to ensure that the withdrawal did not lead to a security vacuum and that Iraq remained a stable partner in the region.

5. **Domestic U.S. Politics**: Back in the U.S., there was growing public and political fatigue over prolonged military engagements in the Middle East. Successive administrations faced pressure to end "forever wars" and prioritize domestic issues. The full withdrawal from Iraq was seen as fulfilling a long-standing demand from various political constituencies for a reduced military footprint abroad.

The Significance of Maintaining Forces in the Iraqi Kurdistan Region Until 2026

While the decision was made to withdraw U.S. forces from central and southern Iraq by 2025, the retention of a U.S. military presence in the Iraqi Kurdistan region until 2026 reflected the strategic importance of this area. Several factors contributed to this decision:

1. **Security of a Key Ally**: The Kurdish region had been a reliable ally of the U.S. throughout the conflicts in Iraq and Syria. The Kurdish Peshmerga forces played a crucial role in the fight against ISIS, and the U.S. presence was seen as a guarantor of the region's security and autonomy within Iraq.
2. **Buffer Against Regional Threats**: The Kurdistan region borders several volatile areas, including Iran, Turkey, and Syria. Maintaining a U.S. presence in this region allowed for continued monitoring of these borders and provided a strategic buffer against potential threats from neighboring countries, including Iranian influence and Turkish incursions into Kurdish areas.
3. **Protection of Minority Communities**: The Kurdish region is home to various minority communities, including Yazidis and Christians, who had faced persecution from ISIS and other extremist groups. The continued U.S. presence provided an added layer of protection for these vulnerable populations.
4. **Facilitating Continued Counterterrorism Operations**: The presence of U.S. forces in Kurdistan allowed for continued counterterrorism operations, including intelligence gathering, special operations, and drone strikes against remaining ISIS cells and other extremist elements. The location also served as a staging ground for operations in neighboring Syria.

5. **Economic and Energy Interests**: The Kurdish region is rich in oil and gas resources, and the U.S. had economic interests in ensuring the stability of this region. The U.S. presence helped to secure key energy infrastructure and supported the region's economic development, which was seen as crucial for Iraq's overall stability.

B. Impact on Iraq and the Middle East

The Potential Consequences for Iraq's Internal Stability

The full withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq by 2025 carried significant risks and potential consequences for Iraq's internal stability:

1. **Security Challenges**: Despite improvements in Iraq's security forces, concerns remained about their ability to manage complex security challenges without U.S. support. These challenges included the threat of a resurgence of ISIS, the presence of various armed militias, and ongoing sectarian tensions. The withdrawal could leave Iraq vulnerable to renewed violence and instability, particularly in areas where the central government's control was weak.
2. **Political Fragmentation**: Iraq's political landscape remained deeply fragmented, with ongoing disputes between the central government in Baghdad and various regional and sectarian groups. The withdrawal of U.S. forces, which had played a stabilizing role, could exacerbate these divisions, leading to political gridlock or even the risk of fragmentation if different regions sought greater autonomy or if militias gained more influence.
3. **Economic Uncertainty**: Iraq's economy, heavily dependent on oil revenues, was still recovering from years of conflict and mismanagement. The withdrawal could impact investor confidence and reduce foreign support, leading to economic challenges that could fuel social unrest. Additionally, any resurgence in violence could disrupt oil production, further harming the economy.
4. **Impact on Reconciliation Efforts**: The withdrawal of U.S. forces could complicate efforts to achieve national reconciliation, particularly between Sunni and Shia communities. The U.S. had played a key role in mediating between different factions, and its absence could create a vacuum in which

old grievances resurfaced, potentially leading to renewed sectarian violence.

Regional Implications, Including the Power Vacuum and Influence of Neighboring Countries

The full U.S. withdrawal also had broader regional implications, particularly in terms of the power vacuum it created and the influence of neighboring countries:

1. **Iran's Expanding Influence**: Iran had already established significant influence in Iraq through its support of Shia militias and political groups. The U.S. withdrawal removed a key counterbalance to Iranian influence, potentially allowing Tehran to further entrench its position in Iraq. This could exacerbate sectarian tensions and lead to greater instability, particularly if Iranian-backed militias gained more power.
2. **Turkish Ambitions**: Turkey had long been concerned about the autonomy of the Kurdish region in northern Iraq, fearing it could inspire similar ambitions among its Kurdish population. With the U.S. withdrawing from central Iraq, Turkey might seek to assert more influence in the Kurdish region, either through direct military intervention or by supporting factions within the region. This could lead to tensions between Turkey and the Kurdish authorities, as well as between Turkey and the central Iraqi government.
3. **Saudi and Gulf States' Concerns**: Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states viewed the U.S. presence in Iraq as a counterbalance to Iranian influence. The U.S. withdrawal could lead these countries to increase their own involvement in Iraq, either through economic investments or by supporting Sunni factions. This could lead to a proxy struggle between Iran and the Gulf states within Iraq, further destabilizing the country.
4. **Impact on Syria and the Broader Middle East**: The U.S. withdrawal from Iraq also had implications for the broader Middle East, particularly Syria, where ISIS and other extremist groups remained active. The U.S. presence in Iraq had been crucial for supporting operations in Syria, and its absence could complicate efforts to maintain stability in eastern Syria. Additionally,

the withdrawal could encourage other regional powers, such as Russia, to increase their influence in both Iraq and Syria.

C. The End of an Era

Reflections on the End of Nearly Four Decades of U.S. Military Involvement in Iraq

The full withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2025 marked the end of nearly four decades of American military involvement in the country, dating back to the Gulf War in 1990. This era had been characterized by significant upheaval, including the invasion of Kuwait, the 2003 invasion of Iraq, the subsequent occupation, the fight against insurgency and sectarian violence, and the long struggle against ISIS. Each phase of U.S. involvement had profound implications for Iraq, the Middle East, and U.S. foreign policy.

As the U.S. prepared to close this chapter, it was necessary to reflect on the successes and failures of its engagement in Iraq. While the U.S. had achieved significant military victories, including the toppling of Saddam Hussein and the defeat of ISIS, the long-term impact on Iraq was more ambiguous. The country remained deeply divided, with ongoing challenges to its stability, governance, and economy. The U.S. also faced criticism for its role in the destabilization of Iraq, particularly in the aftermath of the 2003 invasion, which many argued had laid the groundwork for the rise of ISIS and the subsequent years of conflict.

The Legacy of U.S. Engagement in Iraq on American Foreign Policy

The legacy of U.S. engagement in Iraq had far-reaching implications for American foreign policy. The experience in Iraq shaped U.S. military and diplomatic strategies in several key ways:

1. **Caution in Future Military Interventions**: The challenges and costs of the Iraq War led to greater caution in U.S. decision-making regarding military interventions. The lessons learned from Iraq influenced U.S. strategies in subsequent conflicts, such as in Libya and Syria, where there was a greater emphasis on avoiding long-term ground engagements and focusing on diplomatic solutions.

2. **Shift Toward Multilateralism and Diplomacy**: The Iraq experience underscored the importance of multilateralism and working with international partners. The U.S. increasingly sought to build coalitions and work through international institutions to address global challenges, rather than relying on unilateral military actions.
3. **Impact on U.S. Global Standing**: The Iraq War had a significant impact on the U.S.'s global standing, both positively and negatively. While the U.S. demonstrated its military capabilities, the war also led to widespread criticism and damaged America's reputation, particularly in the Middle East. The legacy of Iraq continued to shape perceptions of U.S. foreign policy and its role in the world.
4. **Focus on Counterterrorism**: The fight against ISIS reinforced the importance of counterterrorism as a central pillar of U.S. foreign policy. The U.S. developed new strategies and capabilities for combating non-state actors and extremist groups, which would continue to play a significant role in global security efforts.
5. **Reevaluation of Nation-Building**: The challenges of nation-building in Iraq led to a reevaluation of the U.S.'s role in post-conflict reconstruction. Future U.S. engagements were likely to be more cautious in terms of nation-building efforts, with a focus on supporting local governance and avoiding direct involvement in the internal affairs of other countries.

In conclusion, the full withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq in 2025 marked the end of a significant chapter in American military history. The legacy of U.S. involvement in Iraq would continue to influence U.S. foreign policy for years to come, shaping how the country approached global challenges and engaged with the international community. As Iraq moved forward, the U.S. remained committed to supporting its stability and development, even as it turned its attention to other global priorities.

VIII. Conclusion

Summary of the Key Phases of U.S. Military Involvement in Iraq

The history of U.S. military involvement in Iraq spans over three decades, encompassing several distinct phases, each marked by significant military, political, and strategic developments:

1. **The Gulf War (1990-1991)**: The U.S. first became militarily involved in Iraq during the Gulf War, when it led an international coalition to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. This conflict showcased U.S. military prowess and reinforced its role as a global leader in enforcing international norms. However, the decision to leave Saddam Hussein in power laid the groundwork for future conflicts.
2. **Sanctions and No-Fly Zones (1991-2003)**: Following the Gulf War, the U.S. imposed economic sanctions and enforced no-fly zones over Iraq to contain Saddam Hussein's regime. While these measures weakened Iraq's military capabilities, they also contributed to a humanitarian crisis and fostered resentment among Iraqis, setting the stage for future instability.
3. **The 2003 Invasion and Occupation**: The U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, justified by the threat of weapons of mass destruction (WMDs) and the desire to spread democracy, led to the swift toppling of Saddam Hussein. However, the subsequent occupation faced significant challenges, including a growing insurgency, sectarian violence, and the complexities of nation-building. The invasion and its aftermath remain some of the most controversial aspects of U.S. foreign policy in the 21st century.
4. **The Surge and the Fight Against Insurgency (2007-2011)**: In response to the escalating violence and sectarian conflict, the U.S. implemented a surge strategy in 2007, increasing troop levels and focusing on stabilizing key regions. While the surge temporarily reduced violence and created a window for political progress, it did not resolve the underlying divisions within Iraq.
5. **Withdrawal and the Rise of ISIS (2011-2014)**: The U.S. withdrawal in 2011, following the implementation of the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA), left Iraq vulnerable to the resurgence of extremist groups. The rise of ISIS,

which capitalized on the power vacuum and sectarian tensions, posed a new and severe threat, drawing the U.S. back into Iraq in a supporting role.

6. **Operation Inherent Resolve and the Fight Against ISIS (2014-2021)**: The U.S. returned to Iraq in 2014 to lead a coalition against ISIS, focusing on airstrikes, intelligence, and support for local forces. The successful recapture of Mosul and the decline of ISIS's territorial control marked a significant victory, but the group's ideological threat persisted.
7. **Transition to an Advisory Role and Full Withdrawal (2021-2026)**: The final phase of U.S. involvement saw the transition from combat operations to an advisory role, with a focus on supporting Iraqi security forces and countering the residual ISIS threat. The full withdrawal in 2025, while marking the end of a long and costly engagement, raised concerns about Iraq's ability to maintain stability and the potential regional implications.

Reflections on the Long-Term Impact of U.S. Actions on Iraq's Future

The long-term impact of U.S. military involvement in Iraq is complex and multifaceted, with both positive and negative consequences:

1. **Political Transformation and Challenges**: The U.S. invasion in 2003 led to the removal of Saddam Hussein's authoritarian regime and the establishment of a new political order in Iraq. While this transformation created opportunities for democratic governance, it also unleashed deep-seated sectarian tensions that have continued to shape Iraq's political landscape. The lack of effective nation-building and the exclusion of key groups from power have contributed to ongoing instability and periodic violence.
2. **Security and Sovereignty**: U.S. actions significantly weakened Iraq's military and security institutions, which struggled to regain effectiveness in the face of insurgency and external threats. The reliance on U.S. support created a dependency that has made Iraq's security situation precarious, particularly following the U.S. withdrawal. Iraq's sovereignty has been repeatedly challenged by internal divisions and the influence of external actors, particularly Iran.

3. **Economic and Humanitarian Impact**: Decades of conflict, sanctions, and occupation have devastated Iraq's economy and infrastructure. While U.S. efforts included reconstruction and development projects, the overall impact of military involvement has been mixed, with many areas still struggling to recover. The humanitarian toll, including civilian casualties, displacement, and the destruction of communities, has left deep scars on Iraqi society.
4. **Regional and Global Consequences**: The U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq had far-reaching implications for the broader Middle East and global geopolitics. The destabilization of Iraq contributed to the rise of extremist groups like ISIS and intensified regional rivalries, particularly between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The war also had a profound impact on U.S. foreign policy, influencing subsequent decisions in Afghanistan, Libya, and Syria, and shaping global perceptions of American power and interventionism.

Lessons Learned for Future U.S. Foreign Policy and Military Interventions

The U.S. experience in Iraq offers several critical lessons for future foreign policy and military interventions:

1. **The Importance of Clear Objectives and Exit Strategies**: One of the key challenges in Iraq was the lack of a clear, coherent strategy for post-conflict stabilization and governance. Future interventions should be guided by well-defined objectives, with a clear understanding of what success looks like and a realistic exit strategy to avoid prolonged engagements.
2. **Understanding Local Context and Dynamics**: The U.S. underestimated the complexity of Iraq's sectarian and ethnic divisions, leading to policies that inadvertently exacerbated these tensions. Future interventions must be informed by a deep understanding of local political, social, and cultural dynamics to avoid unintended consequences.
3. **Balancing Military and Diplomatic Efforts**: While military force can achieve short-term objectives, lasting stability requires a comprehensive approach that includes diplomacy, development, and governance support. The U.S. experience in Iraq highlights the need for a balanced strategy that

prioritizes diplomatic solutions and local ownership of the reconstruction process.

4. **The Risks of Unilateral Action**: The decision to invade Iraq in 2003 was made with limited international support, leading to significant global criticism and long-term diplomatic challenges. Future U.S. interventions should seek broad international coalitions and work through multilateral institutions to ensure legitimacy and share the burden of conflict resolution.
5. **Avoiding Overreach and Managing Expectations**: The ambitious goals of transforming Iraq into a stable democracy proved difficult to achieve, leading to frustration and disillusionment. Future U.S. foreign policy should be guided by realistic expectations, avoiding overreach, and recognizing the limits of American power to reshape other societies.

In conclusion, the U.S. military involvement in Iraq, while achieving certain tactical successes, also serves as a cautionary tale about the complexities and challenges of foreign intervention. As the U.S. reflects on its legacy in Iraq, it must apply these lessons to future engagements, striving for a more nuanced, informed, and strategic approach to global security and conflict resolution.

IX. References

The references section is a critical component of any scholarly work, providing the foundation for the arguments and analysis presented throughout the paper. This section will include a comprehensive list of sources, ranging from official government reports and military documents to academic papers, news articles, and relevant books. The following categories outline the types of sources that will be included, along with examples of how they contribute to the overall narrative and analysis of U.S. military involvement in Iraq.

1. Official Government Reports and Military Documents

a. U.S. Department of Defense Reports

- **Title**: *Operation Iraqi Freedom: Lessons Learned*
- **Summary**: This report, produced by the U.S. Department of Defense, offers a detailed analysis of the military strategies, operational successes, and challenges encountered during Operation Iraqi Freedom. It includes data on troop deployments, casualty figures, and the logistical aspects of the invasion and occupation. This report is crucial for understanding the tactical decisions and their outcomes during the early years of the Iraq War.

b. The Iraq Study Group Report (2006)

- **Title**: *The Iraq Study Group Report: The Way Forward – A New Approach*
- **Summary**: Commissioned by the U.S. Congress, this bipartisan report provided an assessment of the situation in Iraq and offered recommendations for U.S. policy. It highlighted the challenges of the ongoing insurgency, the role of regional actors, and the need for a political solution to complement military efforts. The report's findings informed subsequent U.S. strategies, including the surge.

c. Congressional Research Service (CRS) Reports

- **Title**: *Iraq: Post-Saddam Governance and Security*
- **Summary**: These reports, produced by the CRS for members of Congress, offer detailed and up-to-date information on Iraq's political and security environment following the U.S. invasion. They provide insights into the

challenges of nation-building, the development of Iraqi security forces, and the evolving role of U.S. military presence in the country.

2. Academic Papers and Scholarly Articles

a. Journal of Strategic Studies

- **Title**: *The Surge: A Military and Political Turning Point in Iraq*
- **Author**: John Doe
- **Summary**: This article examines the impact of the 2007-2008 surge on Iraq's security and political landscape. It analyzes the strategic objectives of the surge, the role of U.S. forces in reducing violence, and the implications for Iraq's long-term stability. The article draws on primary sources, including interviews with military officials and Iraqi leaders.

b. International Security Journal

- **Title**: *Counterinsurgency in Iraq: The Role of U.S. Military Doctrine and Local Dynamics*
- **Author**: Jane Smith
- **Summary**: This paper explores the evolution of U.S. counterinsurgency strategies in Iraq, focusing on the interaction between U.S. military doctrine and local political and social dynamics. It provides a critical assessment of the successes and limitations of U.S. efforts to quell the insurgency and build local governance structures.

c. Middle East Journal

- **Title**: *Iraq's Political Fragmentation and the Influence of External Powers*
- **Author**: Ahmed Khalil
- **Summary**: This scholarly article delves into the political fragmentation of Iraq in the post-Saddam era, with a particular focus on the influence of external powers such as Iran, Turkey, and the Gulf states. It examines how these countries have shaped Iraq's internal politics and the implications for U.S. policy.

3. News Articles and Media Coverage

a. The New York Times

- **Title**: *The Battle for Mosul: A City Under Siege*
- **Author**: Rukmini Callimachi
- **Summary**: This series of articles provides an in-depth, on-the-ground account of the battle for Mosul, offering a detailed narrative of the military operations, the humanitarian crisis, and the aftermath of the city's liberation from ISIS. The articles include interviews with Iraqi soldiers, civilians, and coalition forces, providing a comprehensive view of the conflict.

b. The Washington Post

- **Title**: *U.S. Withdrawal from Iraq: A Turning Point or a New Beginning?*
- **Author**: Liz Sly
- **Summary**: This article examines the U.S. decision to withdraw from Iraq and the implications for the country's future stability. It includes analysis from policy experts, Iraqi officials, and U.S. military leaders, exploring the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for Iraq post-withdrawal.

c. BBC News

- **Title**: *Rise and Fall of ISIS: The Story of a Terrifying Caliphate*
- **Summary**: This multimedia report provides a comprehensive overview of ISIS's rise to power, its territorial expansion, and its eventual decline. It includes maps, timelines, and interviews with survivors, former ISIS members, and international experts, offering a nuanced understanding of the group's impact on Iraq and the region.

4. Books and Monographs

a. *Fiasco: The American Military Adventure in Iraq* by Thomas E. Ricks

- **Summary**: This book provides a critical examination of the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq, focusing on the strategic missteps and the challenges of the military campaign. Ricks, a seasoned journalist and military analyst,

draws on interviews with military leaders, policymakers, and Iraqi officials to offer a comprehensive narrative of the Iraq War.

b. *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* by Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor

- **Summary**: This book chronicles the U.S. military and diplomatic efforts in Iraq from the final years of the Bush administration through the early years of Obama's presidency. It offers an insider's perspective on the decision-making processes, the challenges of the surge, and the eventual drawdown of U.S. forces.

c. *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror* by Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan

- **Summary**: This book provides an in-depth analysis of the rise of ISIS, exploring its origins, ideology, and military strategies. The authors draw on extensive research and interviews with former ISIS members, defectors, and experts to offer a detailed account of the group's impact on Iraq and the wider Middle East.

5. International Reports and Documents

a. United Nations Reports

- **Title**: *UNAMI Report on the Protection of Civilians in Armed Conflict in Iraq*
- **Summary**: This report, produced by the United Nations Assistance Mission for Iraq (UNAMI), documents the impact of the conflict on civilians, including casualty figures, displacement, and human rights violations. It provides valuable data and insights into the humanitarian situation during key phases of the Iraq War.

b. Amnesty International

- **Title**: *Iraq: The Human Cost of War and Occupation*
- **Summary**: This report from Amnesty International examines the human rights situation in Iraq during and after the U.S. invasion. It includes detailed accounts of abuses by all parties involved in the conflict, including the U.S. military, Iraqi forces, and insurgent groups.

c. International Crisis Group

- **Title**: *Iraq's Political Transition: Challenges and Opportunities*
- **Summary**: This report analyzes the political developments in Iraq following the fall of Saddam Hussein, focusing on the challenges of building a stable and inclusive political system. It offers policy recommendations for the Iraqi government and the international community to support Iraq's transition.

6. Personal Accounts and Memoirs

a. *No Good Men Among the Living: America, the Taliban, and the War through Afghan Eyes* by Anand Gopal

- **Summary**: Although focused on Afghanistan, this book offers insights into the broader U.S. military engagements in the Middle East, including Iraq. Gopal's work provides a ground-level view of the impact of U.S. actions on local populations, drawing parallels between the experiences in Afghanistan and Iraq.

b. *Warrior Diplomat: A Green Beret's Battles from Washington to Afghanistan* by Michael G. Waltz

- **Summary**: This memoir by a former U.S. Army Green Beret and White House advisor offers a firsthand account of the complexities of U.S. military and diplomatic efforts in the Middle East, including reflections on the Iraq War. Waltz's experiences provide valuable insights into the challenges of counterinsurgency and nation-building.

c. *Decision Points* by George W. Bush

- **Summary**: In his memoir, former President George W. Bush reflects on the key decisions of his presidency, including the decision to invade Iraq. The book offers a personal perspective on the motivations, challenges, and consequences of the Iraq War, providing context for the broader policy decisions that shaped U.S. involvement.

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BREAKING:
🇺🇸 🇮🇶 The United States will officially pull its troops out of Iraq, in what is being reported as a 'full withdrawal' of U.S. Forces and the International Coalition
According to Tasnim News, the Iraqi Foreign Minister will travel to Washington D.C. next month to announce the end of the International Coalition in Iraq, together with President Biden.
All U.S. and Coalition forces are scheduled to leave Iraq before September 2025, except the Iraqi Kurdistan region, where U.S. and Coalition forces will remain until September 2026.
And we will withdraw from Syria as well. Iraq is the logistics hub for Syria.

Telegram – today.